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ABSTRACT

The junior-high or high-school student who reads below the fourth-grade level was cited as a national problem. Those students must be identified by reading specialists and English teachers, and programs must be prepared to correct these reading disabilities through motivation and skill building. Because of this need, the author described the research that went into the development of Scholastic Magazine's ACTION, a 90-day multimedia program for secondary students who read below the fourth-grade level. (NH)

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THE RIGHT TO READ -- An Editor's Point of View

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I am going to speak to you today about a significant problem in junior and senior high schools throughout the country. It is the student who reads below the fourth grade level.

I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak informally to many of you before this session, because I recognize that you know this problem does not concern only a handful of students in a handful of schools. It is a national problem. Urban schools are probalby most plagued by it, but suburban and rural schools haven't avoided it, either.

The immediate task is identification of the secondary student who reads below the fourth grade level. In visits to schools, I often find reading specialists and English teachers reluctant to admit that some students are below the fourth grade level. In part, I think that this reluctance can be attributed to shock, and I must agree that such a situation is shocking. Of course, we need to seek causes for this condition. We need also to work, as Commissioner Allen has stated, to guarantee every schoolchild's "right to read" during the 1970's. But while we seek to prevent the problem, we must also attempt to cure the victims of it. Refusing to recognize the student who reads below the fourth grade level will not ameliorate the situation.

Another part of the reluctance to admit that many reading specialists and English teachers do not realize that they have students below the fourth grade level. These teachers receive the results of standardized reading tests, and these results indicate that none of the students are below the fourth grade level in reading. Often I'm told, "I have nine students reading at 4.2, but none below 4.0."

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An examination of individual tests would very quickly show the fallacy in accepting standardized test scores as the sole measure of grade level ability in reading, especially scores made by remedial students. For example, most

standardized reading tests for secondary students provide grade level reading scores of 3.0 and up. This means that the non-reader, the 0.0 reader, has a score of 3.0 before he takes the test. To guess his way to a 4.2 reading score, he needs only to get about 10 per cent of the questions right on most standardized tests.

Please don't conclude that I'm against standardized testing. I'm against using the standardized test as the sole measure of reading achievement and ability. Supplemented by diagnostic tests and informal reading inventories, standardized tests can help to provide a more accurate picutre of each student's reading skills and weaknesses.

Thus far, I have said that many reading specialists and English teachers are reluctant to admit that some of their students are below the fourth grade level in reading or are unaware of that fact. Perhaps "many" is the wrong word. Perhaps many reading specialists and English teachers have identified their secondary students who read below the fourth grade level. However, identification remains a prime concern.

After identification, the immediate task becomes the preparation of a program to correct reading disabilities through motivation and skillbuilding. I'd like to devote the remainder of my time with you to a new program from Scholastic developed to help with that task.

About six years ago, Scholastic introduced Scope, a magazine written at the fourth-to-sixth grade level for secondary school students. Educators and students responded with enthsiasm to Scope, and today the magazine is read each week by close to two million students. From the best of Scope, Scholastic developed Contact, thematic units for secondary students with reading and/or other learning disabilities. In addition, Scholastic developed many Scope/Skills materials aimed at the same students.

About three years ago, educators started to ask the editors of Scope "What is available for secondary students who read below the fourth grade level?"

In response to this question, we, at Scholastic, looked carefully at the vocabulary and sentence lenth requirements for materials written below the fourth grade level. Then we wrote and adapted some short stories for secondary school students -- stories written at the second grade level according to the Spache Readability Formula. We also developed an outline for a 90-day program to be used with students who read below the fourth grade level.

Our next step was to consult with experts in the reading field. For this purpose, we met with James Sawyer of The Learning Institute of North Carolina, and Dr. Paul Stanton of The Reading Laboratory at the University of Pittsburgh. Both men agreed that the need for such a program was great and that scholastic was started in the right direction. They also agreed to help test materials and consult with us on their development. In addition, we also asked Virginia Yates, Reading Specialist at the Metropolitan Junior College in Kansas City, Missouri, to act as consultant to the program. All that happened early in 1968.

Today, after testing materials in eighteen school systems in eight states and communicating constantly with our consultants and other educators, I'm happy to be able to say that Scholastic's ACTION, a 90-day milti-media program for secondary students who read below the fourth grade level, is ready for classroom use.

Rather than try to describe the record, posters, and other components in the ACTION Kit, I'd like to focus on the things we tried to examine in our prepublication testing of the materials. For convenience, I'm going to call these things prevailing opinions, and I'll describe how these opinions fared in testing.

The first prevailing opinion is that urban students, especially inner-city urban students, do not relate well to stories which are outside their realms of experience. If this opinion were true, a story about a yound lady who acted heroically during a Revolutionary War battle would be of littly interest to

urban students. To test this opinion, we had students in San Diego, Pittsburgh New York, Charlotte, North Carolina, Kansas City, Missouri, and Elizabeth, New Jersey read the story and respond to it. We also had students in a like number of suburban and rural areas read the story and respond to it. No clear pattern emerged. All students responded in basically the same manner. Incidentally, most students liked the story, and, of course, the girls liked it better than the boys. I could cite other examples about other stories, but the key point here is that urban, suburban, and rural students couldn't be separated according to their views about stories which they had read. Certainly, more research into student interests would be worthwhile.

The second prevailing opinion is that remedial readers at secondary level prefer photo illustration s to drawn illustrations. In our testing, no pattern to support this opinion emerged. However, students did prefer realistic illustrations, either photos or drawings, to abstract illustrations. More research about illustrations also would be worthwhile.

I could go on with suggestions about additional research, but I think it's sufficient to say that publishers and educators need to be involved more in the prepublication testing of materials.

We think that our ACTION Kit represents a cooperative effort. It represents the views and knowledge of its editors and three experts in the reading field, but it also represents the views and knowledge of 32 teachers in 18 schools systems and about a thousand students. We think the materials we have published as a result of this cooperative effort are the best available for secondary students who read below the fourth grade level. But we don't think that the materials are beyond imprevement, and we hope that on the spot research with ACTION in the classroom will provide the basis for any improvements. Finally, we hope that efforts to prevent this reading problem will be more fruitful during the 1970's, because we believe that the insuring of every schoolchild's right to read is essential for the preservation of democracy.

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